THE USE OF A CANE BY THE BLIND

By Henry M.Bindt

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FREQUENTLY I, who am totally blind, have been told I should carry a cane in going around alone. Recently this admonition was made so often that I resolved to write my reply.

The outstanding feature about those who make this admonition is, they are invariably persons who do not know me intimately, and, I confidently assert, do not intimately know a single blind person. They argue that a cane would facilitate my going about, and that it would enable others to perceive that I am blind; then they would take more care to avoid any accident. Whenever any one thinks my feelings are growing ruffled under his advice, he retreats behind the argument that a great many men carry canes all the time, so that there would be nothing conspicuous in it.

In support of the first point, these people say that a cane would enable me to know when to step up or down, or when there might be a hole in front of me. The average cane is quite incapable of giving sufficient warning of any step, especially down, unless the person carrying it will reach way out in front of him, which is wholly unnecessary. After a little thorough experience a blind person learns to know pretty well when he approaches a step. This is possible by listening to one's footsteps, by noticing slopes and the width of streets, and by taking into account the presence of big objects, which one can detect through a subtle sense of feeling. In fact, I believe that if there is any real compensation for the loss of sight, it is in the development of this sense, which has not yet been adequately explained by science and of whose existence the vast majority of people are wholly unaware. I am convinced that it is the manifestation of this sense which perplexes so many who observe the actions of a blind man.

Then, too, a cane is utterly incapable of giving any warning of trees and poles, but since it is possible to detect such things at a distance of several feet, I can find no reason for carrying a cane to locate them. Helped by this strange sense, I have even found it comparatively easy to board street-cars nearly every day without the assistance of a cane. Indeed, one would be a distinct hindrance, for I am always glad to have both hands free. On the strength of my own personal experience, which has now continued for six years, I am convinced that a cane fails utterly to warn one of objects with which he is liable to collide, and that it is intimidating. He who forms the habit is afraid to take a single step unless he first puts out his cane to assure himself he will tread on solid ground. Instead, one should strive to walk freely and fearlessly, which he can do by having faith in himself and by being observant.

As I understand the second argument, it is presumed that if any one saw me approaching with a cane he would perceive that I am blind and would take more care than usual to avoid a collision. I vividly remember one occasion when, as I walked rapidly and inattentively down a street, my forehead suddenly struck a protruding fire-alarm box with such violence that the blow nearly sent me backward. If I had had any intimation of its presence, I know that I could not have deliberately walked on as fast as I was going until my forehead struck that metallic box. I think the same principle applies to people meeting me on the street. I cannot believe there is a single person who could see me and walk directly toward me until we collided, whether or not I showed any sign of getting out of his path. Accordingly, I would infer that if a person saw me at all he would step aside before walking straight into me, and I am convinced that if any one could not see a man approaching, there is little possibility that that person would see him any better when the man carried a cane, which

might be very slender and only partly visible. There is but one conclusion to draw—a cane is useless.

In reality it is an impediment. A man may often overtake people going in the same direction, and may often have to pass people, silently standing with their backs toward him. A cane would not help him to pass these people, and they would not see him approaching. By training one's ears to catch the sounds of footsteps and voices, and by learning to use one's sense of feeling, one can pass them easily, as a normal person would.

I think that any fear of danger from vehicles can be dismissed just as quickly. In suburban or country districts one may often have occasion to follow much-travelled roads. Then there is only one thing to do—it is to keep well on the right-hand side of the road. There is little danger that an automobile will come over on the right-hand side of the road to run over a man, especially when he is well on the side and has the right of way. In a city, almost the only time one need fear passing vehicles is in crossing streets, and here again there is only one choice. A person can do positively nothing but wait until the street is quiet, and then cross. If there is an unusual amount of traffic, it saves time simply to ask somebody to assist one across the street. If, in either country or city, an automobile suddenly comes upon one, the driver is not likely to let his machine run over any pedestrian whom he sees; and again I think that if the driver cannot see a man, he could hardly be expected to see him any quicker when the man carries a cane. Here again there is but one conclusion to draw—a cane is useless. In fact, I believe that if one depended on a cane to help him and warn others of his handicap he would take less care to be on the side of the road, trusting the driver would look out for him, and thus would be unnecessarily endangered.

Following the loss of my sight, I was placed in the California School for the Blind, which I attended for upward of six years. During this period there was not one student who used a cane. In fact, they derisively called blind people who did "Cane-ites." I shall always remember those boys as the finest, bravest, most independent lot I have ever known.

The one recognized object of the school was to train the students to be as nearly as possible normal men and women. I came in personal contact with approximately thirty teachers, matrons, supervisors, and other officers, not one of whom, from the superintendent himself to the trained nurse in the hospital, ever suggested the use of a cane. Three of these teachers were totally blind and two partially, yet none of them used or ever advised a single student to use a cane. Indeed, the matron in my dormitory building once sharply reproved me for using a cane on account of a sprained ankle. When I made my explanation, she tersely ordered me to the hospital and to "put away that cane." One teacher has now worked with the blind for nearly forty years, another twenty-five; and the matron of whom I have spoken has held her position for twenty-four years.

While at the school, I observed that the very small boys played freely and happily with no thought of ever using a cane. As they grew in years and experience they gained more ability in moving about. To have put canes in their hands at any time would have been simply to restrict them; and it is evident the school has no idea of imposing any such restriction. It has a large swimming-tank in which all the students are expected to go, and even taught to swim. The boys are also required to attend regular gymnasium classes. The instructor has always encouraged apparatus work, such as jumping over booms and bucks, climbing ladders and swinging in rings, swinging on a trapeze and using parallel bars. He is also in the habit of taking the class out on the athletic field, where he divides it into two teams, matching them in a game of push-ball. Sometimes his exercises consist of running. If on the athletic field, the boys run in pairs, one who can see a little with one who cannot, because they must run in a circle. But sometimes the instructor takes them on the cement sidewalk just outside the school wall. Here they run singly, successfully avoiding each other and all accidents. All this can only preclude any dependence on a cane.

There is a certain deadly symbolism

behind the use of a cane by the blind, and it is this that I at present most deplore. The general public invariably thinks of a blind man as carrying a cane. Ask any one at all who has not been previously enlightened if he thinks blind men always carry canes, and your answer will certainly be in the affirmative. Thus it is that the cane has become the symbol of blindness, and of all its horror and hideous dependence. The one idea that has been impressed upon me during the last eight years is that I must take my place in the world just like a normal man. Since the cane is the symbol of blindness, if one carries a cane, he is going to feel his handicap. But, on the other hand, if he is capable of going around without a cane, he acquires new courage and manliness. He merely remembers that he is a man, and that he has a man's work to do. For seven years I honestly believed it would never be possible for me to learn my way around the place in which I now live. When I finally made the attempt, which proved successful, I started by carrying a cane; but now I know it is more desirable by far to walk without one. When a blind man lays aside his cane, he rises incredibly in self-respect. He distinctly feels that he has cast aside all the hideousness of blindness; and when his friends understand his feelings and are accustomed to seeing him without a cane, I am confident their respect for him is greatly enhanced.

Finally, those who advise the use of a cane usually conclude by saying that there is nothing conspicuous in it, because a lot of men carry canes. This is certainly true, but it merely confirms my statement that a cane is useless; so, why carry one? In my opinion any one of the numerous objections I have cited is sufficient reason for discarding any dependence on a cane. My only concern in writing this very frank and thorough discussion is to help correct the noxious impression that all blind people should be "addicted" to the use of canes. This impression must vanish before the best results in the work for the blind can be attained.

THE UNMASKING

By William Strong

OFTEN when you've smiled on me
  I have looked into your eyes
  With a sort of sick surmise
As to what the end would be

If you lived with me until
  You had seen me as I am,
  And laid bare this shallow sham,
Would you want to kiss me still?

If you glimpsed in me at last
  Every weakness you can guess,
  Saw my sorry selfishness
In our laughter of the past,
Saw surrender to my fears,
  Shame and sorrow in me, too,
  Would I turn and find that you
Still were smiling through your tears?

Brave and lovely, then be brave,
  (Lovely you will always be)
  Do not take your eyes from me
Nor recall the lips you gave:

If that day come, let it kill
  Both our hearts and burst the bars—
  Maybe somewhere past the stars
You will dare to love me still.